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Indigenous political representation in the Ecuadorian legislative power (2005-2025): an analysis of the parliamentary management in 2021

Representación política indígena en el poder legislativo ecuatoriano (2005-2025): un análisis sobre la gestión parlamentaria en el año 2021

Gabriela Rosas Lanas¹ , Diego Zambrano Álvarez²

¹ Universidad Internacional SEK. Quito, Ecuador.

² Universidad Tecnológica Equinoccial (UTE). Quito, Ecuador.

Abstract

This study analyzes the evolution of Indigenous political representation in Ecuador's legislative branch between 2005 and 2025, focusing on the year 2021, when the Pachakutik Movement achieved its highest level of parliamentary representation. Through a descriptive and analytical approach, the number of seats held, legislative performance, proposed bills, and the political influence of the Indigenous bloc are examined. The findings show that despite the historic achievement in 2021, factors such as internal fragmentation, leadership conflicts, and unstable alliances limited its political impact. The paper also explores the legal and socio-political framework shaping Indigenous inclusion, highlighting historical tensions between Indigenous movements and the government. Although there have been legal advancements, structural barriers and co-optation strategies continue to undermine the consolidation of effective and sustained Indigenous political representation in Ecuador.

Keywords: *Indigenous representation, Pachakutik movement, parliamentary management, Plurinational state, Ecuadorian legislative power*

Resumen

Este estudio analiza la representación política indígena en el poder legislativo ecuatoriano entre 2005 y 2025, enfocándose en el año 2021, cuando el Movimiento Pachakutik alcanzó su mayor representación parlamentaria. A través de un enfoque descriptivo y analítico, se examina el número de escaños ocupados, la gestión legislativa, los proyectos de ley impulsados y la capacidad de incidencia política del bloque indígena. Se evidencia que, pese al hito de representación logrado en 2021, factores como la fragmentación interna, conflictos de liderazgo y alianzas inestables limitaron su impacto político. El trabajo también aborda el marco jurídico y sociopolítico que ha condicionado la inclusión indígena, resaltando las tensiones históricas entre los movimientos indígenas y los gobiernos. Aunque se han logrado avances normativos, persisten barreras estructurales y estrategias de cooptación que han debilitado la consolidación de una representación política efectiva y sostenida del movimiento indígena en Ecuador.

Palabras clave: *Representación indígena, movimiento Pachakutik, gestión parlamentaria, Estado plurinacional, Poder legislativo ecuatoriano.*

Correspondence: Gabriela Rosas Lanas (diana.rosas@uisek.edu.ec)

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Introduction

The political participation of Indigenous peoples and nationalities in Ecuador has historically been limited, despite their significant demographic and cultural presence. It has evolved from total exclusion at the beginning of the Republic, through the tolerance of customary practices, to the transformation of the State into a plurinational one. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), founded in 1986, has played an important role in structuring and representing Indigenous nationalities, fighting for their rights and visibility in the national political arena. The Plurinational Unity Movement Pachakutik, the political arm of CONAIE, was established in 1995 with the purpose of channeling Indigenous demands into electoral and legislative arenas.

This representation has undergone substantial variations in recent decades. For example, in the 2021 elections, Pachakutik won 27 seats, becoming the country's second political force, which does not necessarily translate into the capacity to impose an agenda or position issues of interest. Representation has been inconsistent, unstable, and ineffective.

This research focuses on analyzing the political representation of the Ecuadorian Indigenous sector in the legislative branch during the period 2005–2025. It is hypothesized that factors such as internal fragmentation within Indigenous movements, leadership conflicts, strategies of political cooptation, and electoral volatility have been decisive in shaping Indigenous representation in the National Assembly. The specific objectives are to examine how Indigenous political participation in the legislative branch has evolved during the period in question, as well as to delve into its legislative performance in the Assembly, especially in 2021. Through a historical, political, and legislative analysis of the 2005–2025 period, it is possible to understand how these dynamics have functioned as factors reflecting the level of parliamentary representation of the Indigenous sector over time.

Theoretical Framework

Political participation and representation of the Indigenous sector in Latin America has been a heterogeneous and fluctuating process, shaped by the social, cultural, and economic context of each country. On the one hand, political participation in the Peruvian context has been perceived as a weak area, where there are no Indigenous movements with prominence and autonomy in society, nor a significant capacity for political influence, despite relevant changes related to the formation of new organizations aspiring to build social movements with national reach (Aragón, 2012). On the other hand, as Aragón (2012) notes, in countries such as Bolivia, the Indigenous sector has become an essential political actor in displacing parties and organizations that previously led political participation and representation.

In the case of Ecuador, its history and plurinational origins have entailed diverse stages of claims for rights, power, and influence in decision-making. Being partly constituted by multiple Indigenous nationalities, the country has created a context in which representation and political participation rights are necessary to meet the needs of these groups. As mentioned by Rivadeneira Yépez et al. (2024), particularly since the 1990s, a significant milestone was marked regarding Indigenous political and social demands through the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). Through this mechanism of representation, the defense of recognition of peoples and nationalities was constructed in a more structured manner, based on the full recognition of a diverse and intercultural society (Rivadeneira Yépez et al., 2024).

Moreover, Indigenous political representation in Ecuador cannot be conceived outside a historical approach in which Indigenous peoples have been intrinsically rooted in their ancestral territories for millennia, territories with which their identity is defined (Rivadeneira Yépez et al., 2024). According to Illaqui (2008), this connection to territory has enabled them to constitute and shape their ethnic identity and sense of belonging to a people, collective, or movement, in order to restore the conception of the ancestral lands they inhabit and their destiny as

groups with identity, rights, and political participation. As Illaquiche (2008) describes, through this trajectory the political landscape of countries—among them Ecuador—has been shaped, particularly through the strengthening of the Indigenous movement as a social actor capable of claiming collective rights of peoples and nationalities in order to gain visibility before the State in different decision-making arenas.

With this in mind, it is possible to understand how over the years the Indigenous sector has managed to establish itself as a visible actor in national politics, especially due to its presence and identity-based representation in territories with a higher Indigenous population, such as Chimborazo, Imbabura, Cotopaxi, or Tungurahua (Aguilar Guamán, 2007). Likewise, Altmann (2013a) emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical trajectory of Indigenous political representation in Ecuador as a succession of different organizations with distinct objectives, interests, and ideologies. Because these organizations represent different collectives, there are constant processes of organization and reorganization that also explain the level of political influence and participation of the Indigenous sector, as seen in events such as the uprisings of 1990 and 1994, the overthrow of former president Abdalá Bucaram in 1997, or that of Jamil Mahuad in 2000 (Altmann, 2013b).

This allows political representation to be analyzed within a long trajectory of highs and lows where, as Altmann (2013a) notes, certain organizations or movements tend to exert greater influence than others, either due to alliances among collectives or the strength of their organizations. This, on the one hand, complicates collective action within the sector and generates fragmentation, while on the other hand it favors local growth of the movement. Therefore, studying Indigenous political representation in Ecuador's legislative branch is pertinent in order to explore how Indigenous participation has changed over time and under which parties it has been able to exert influence in the National Assembly. According to Aguilar Guamán (2007), at the beginning of the 2000s, Indigenous participation in positions such as provincial prefects was limited and occurred through the Plurinational Unity Movement Pachakutik.

However, over the years, legislative-level political representation fluctuated to a greater or lesser extent depending on the country's political context, resulting in the Indigenous bloc becoming a political actor capable of shaping the legislative agenda.

From a theoretical perspective, this research is situated within the identity paradigm, which allows for understanding how social movements construct their agendas for action based on collective identity (Svampa, 2009). As highlighted by Rivadeneira Yépez et al. (2024), the notion of Indigenous nationalities and their political representation must be understood through their shared history, language, customs, culture, and practices, which shape the political and economic organization of movements. The legal framework of neoconstitutionalism, on the other hand, facilitates the analysis of legal reforms that have influenced Indigenous representation, particularly with regard to social rights and political participation (Carbonell, 2010). The 2008 Constitution and the Democracy Code have introduced key regulatory changes in this area, whose impact on Indigenous participation requires detailed analysis.

Likewise, understanding the notion of political representation is essential when analyzing its implications, scenarios, and changes in the Ecuadorian context. According to Svampa (2009), political representation is the discursive and identity-based platform of a segment of society—whether peasant or Indigenous movements, urban territorial groups, socio-environmental movements, collectives, among others—that reflects the presence of a set of diverse demands with their respective identity cleavages. In other words, it is a mechanism that makes present, in some sense, the delegation of power that a political collective grants to certain officials elected through voting, who adopt and make decisions on behalf of that community (Juri, 2021, as cited in Samaniego-Fernández & Pinos-Jaén, 2023).

According to Samaniego-Fernández and Pinos-Jaén (2023), political representation is interrelated with citizen participation in the exercise of democracy, and in Ecuador there are rights and guarantees that allow citizens to intervene in government decisions, although this often does not occur in practice. It is

through political representation that it becomes possible to shape a field, change an agenda, or restructure a multi-organizational area in which reaching agreements is difficult (Svampa, 2009). Considering these factors, and bearing in mind that they are composed of different demands, political representation conveys a tendency toward reaffirming what is different yet necessary for a group, so that it may be recognized and express itself through different functions and direct actions within society.

The Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement: A Historical–Sociological Perspective

Touraine (1995, as cited in Chihu Amparán & López Gallegos, 2007) argues that a social movement is configured as a form of collective action with a cultural and social orientation, characterized by a group's position of domination or dependence within a given historical period. In this sense, the Indigenous sector in Ecuador, since the time of colonization, has been positioned as a dominated group and, in response, has sought to transform the structure of state institutions. This process has driven the construction of a plurinational State that recognizes cultural diversity, values, and constitutive elements as part of national identity (Sánchez Parga, 2010).

The Ecuadorian Indigenous movement thus emerges as the result of practices and discourses of reivindication that distinguish it from other political and social actors (Sánchez Parga, 2010). Consequently, this sector has developed its own agenda, with the capacity to influence political arenas and transform Ecuadorian social structures. From this perspective, its roots date back to the colonial period, intensified in the late nineteenth century, and consolidated throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Indigenous struggle has maintained historical continuity, beginning with uprisings against the Spanish colonial regime. However, after Independence and the formation of the Republic, structures of Indigenous exploitation were inherited by the Creole elite, perpetuating inequality (Ayala, 2008). In this way, Indigenous rights continued to be violated, and their role was reduced to that of a labor force within a latifundist productive system.

In the republican context, regionalization defined three main spaces: the central-northern Highlands, the southern Highlands, and the coastal Guayas region (Ayala, 2008). This fragmentation generated tensions between the Highland landowning class and the coastal bourgeoisie, affecting national cohesion. Within this structure, the Indigenous population was relegated to precarious working conditions on haciendas and large estates.

One of the first Indigenous uprisings against the hacienda system and repression occurred in 1870, led by Fernando Daquilema in Riobamba, in response to the exploitation and mistreatment suffered by Indigenous peoples (Moreno et al., 2018). With the Liberal Revolution, the State attempted to position itself as a guarantor of Indigenous rights, promoting the abolition of the *huasipungo* system and establishing a framework of ethnic administration (Martínez & Acosta, 2014). Nevertheless, the liberal vision was assimilationist and, as a result, encountered resistance from peoples who preserved an ancestral identity.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the expansion of latifundism and cacao exports increased the demand for Indigenous labor, but without improving living conditions. This led to protests such as those of 1923 against the government of José Luis Tamayo (Ayala, 2008). The Juliana Revolution of 1925—whose roots can be traced to the brutal massacre of workers in Guayaquil on November 15, 1922 (Paz & Cepeda, 2016)—raised alarms regarding the need to adopt protective labor legislation to pacify Ecuadorian society. However, these reforms primarily benefited bureaucracy and urban middle classes, without producing significant changes in power structures or Indigenous exclusion (Ayala, 2008).

During the 1930s, the Indigenous movement acquired a new dimension with the enactment of the Law on the Organization and Regime of Communes in 1937, which legally recognized the Andean *ayllu* as a model of social organization (Sánchez Parga, 2010). This legalization process strengthened Indigenous organizational awareness, laying the foundations for future political participation within the Ecuadorian State. The 1930s were also marked by workers'

struggles demanding recognition of labor rights and minimum conditions of decent work, which initially faced brutal state repression but eventually resulted in the enactment of the Labor Code in 1938 (López Valarezo, 2020).

According to Altmann (2013a), the convergence of factors and social demands led the Indigenous movement to find allies in left-wing sectors, although Indigenous cosmovision does not necessarily align with the left, and even less so with the right, as both represent essentially European perspectives that differ from Indigenous worldviews. This divergence is particularly evident in development models, where the Indigenous naturalistic vision contrasts sharply with statist exploitation promoted by the left or privatization proposals advanced by the right.

The process of communalization continued during the 1940s and 1950s, enabling Indigenous communities to strengthen their structures of struggle and land defense. In 1944, the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians (FEI) assumed a leading role in peasant mobilization against the prevailing latifundist system (Tibán, 2001). In 1964, the first agrarian reform took place, with the primary objective of modernizing productive structures, although it achieved limited success in terms of land redistribution (Martínez & Acosta, 2014).

In the 1970s, the expansion of capitalism and the oil boom altered the country's economic context, promoting increased exploitation of Indigenous territories. In response, new Indigenous organizations emerged, such as ECUARUNARI in 1972, with the aim of defending Indigenous territorial and cultural rights against the advance of extractivism (Ayala, 2008). That same year, following the coup d'état against the Velasco Ibarra regime, General Guillermo Rodríguez Lara assumed leadership of the country. His regime defined itself as revolutionary, nationalist, popular, anti-feudal, and anti-oligarchic (Montúfar, 2022). The dictatorship promoted a new agrarian reform process with greater impact than the previous one, though still falling short of Indigenous demands.

With the return to democracy in 1979, Indigenous organizations found a favorable environment for consolidation. During the 1980s, economic crisis and

the implementation of neoliberal policies disproportionately affected vulnerable sectors, exacerbating social inequality and strengthening Indigenous resistance to the dominant economic model (Grinspun, 2008). This process culminated in the 1990 Indigenous uprising led by CONAIE, marking a turning point in Ecuadorian politics (Martínez & Acosta, 2014).

From 1995 onward, with the creation of the Plurinational Unity Movement Pachakutik, the Indigenous sector formally entered the electoral political arena. Since then, it has played a key role in public policy formulation and in the construction of the plurinational State (Cordero, 2008). However, relations between progressive governments and the Indigenous movement have been ambivalent. The Indigenous movement that participated in the de facto seizure of power alongside Lucio Gutiérrez in 2000 was instrumental in his rise to the presidency in 2003 and participated briefly in his government. Yet, shortly after taking office, Gutiérrez adopted a neoliberal stance favoring free trade with the United States, prompting the Indigenous movement to withdraw from the government and reposition itself within resistance and social struggle, which intensified until his overthrow during the so-called *rebellion of the forajidos* in April 2005 (Arias, 2006).

In 2006, Rafael Correa assumed the presidency with an agenda that incorporated Indigenous demands, earning him support during the Montecristi Constituent Assembly of 2008. Nevertheless, his administration soon became marked by confrontations due to the imposition of extractivist policies and the criminalization of social protest (Martínez & Acosta, 2014). The rise of extractivism and repression of mobilizations—such as the Great Plurinational March for Water in 2012—exposed the contradictions within governmental discourse (Correa, 2012).

From this analysis, it can be inferred that the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement has been a strategic actor that has gradually forged its own political imprint, capable of articulating collective demands and challenging entrenched power structures (Chichu, 1999). Accordingly, the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement has followed a

historical process of resistance and transformation, evolving from territorial struggle to political participation. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, organizational, discursive, and political strategies have developed that have significantly impacted state structures. However, the relationship between the Indigenous sector and political power has been marked by alliances, tensions, and internal conflicts that have shaped its legislative representation and its capacity to influence public policy formulation.

Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador and the Democracy Code: Building Participatory Politics?

The 2008 Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador represents the most relevant legal framework for the promotion of rights and guarantees at the national level. To understand this conception, it is necessary to consider neoconstitutionalism, a non-formalist legal doctrine (Zagrebelsky, 1995) that seeks to explain the adoption of extensive catalogues of rights and how these are applied within the structure of the State. For his part, Gil (2011) defines neoconstitutionalism as a current within the rule of law grounded in constitutional supremacy, implying that all norms and state actions must be interpreted in light of the Constitution and always understood in relation to it.

Ferrajoli distinguishes two models of the rule of law in new constitutions: in the first, statutory law predominates, while in the second, constitutional supremacy prevails (Gil, 2011). In Ecuador, the prevailing model is the State of rights, in which the rights recognized in the Constitution and in international treaties function as the supreme legal source and as the programmatic axis of public administration (Ávila, 2011). This trend not only redefines the separation of powers and their competencies, but also incorporates a high level of substantive normative content regulating the conduct of state institutions (Carbonell, 2011). In the Ecuadorian case, it additionally incorporates legal pluralism as a constitutive element of the plurinational model.

The 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution is distinguished by its extensive recognition of rights, with particular emphasis on collective or third-generation rights, held

by Indigenous communities, peoples, and nationalities. A noteworthy provision is Article 65, which, together with Article 3 of the Organic Electoral Law, establishes affirmative action measures to guarantee the participation of historically discriminated sectors, while also reclaiming ancestral forms of political organization through the recognition of community-based democracy (Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, 2008, Art. 65; Organic Electoral Law, 2009).

Despite this framework, and despite increased electoral participation by Indigenous candidates, their minority representation does not guarantee effective participation. This is due, among other factors, to their status as a minority sector and the persistence of racist attitudes within certain segments of the population. To complement these measures, the State has promoted public policies aimed at fostering equity and access to political power, including the establishment of ethnic quota percentages. In many cases, these policies have resulted in a quantitative increase in Indigenous presence, but with limited—almost negligible—effects on the actual functioning and decision-making of public institutions.

An example of this is Ministerial Agreement No. 56 issued by the Ministry of Labor Relations (2012), which, in accordance with the Organic Law on Public Service (LOSEP) and its regulations, establishes normative mechanisms for the allocation of public positions. Under this agreement, merit-based and competitive examinations grant an additional five points, as an affirmative action measure, to Indigenous applicants who obtain at least 70 points in their final evaluation (Ministry of Labor Relations, 2012).

Along similar lines, Article 171 of the Constitution grants Indigenous peoples the right to exercise their own systems of justice, in accordance with their traditions and worldview (Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, 2008, Art. 171). This recognition obliges the National Judicial System to respect the decisions of Indigenous authorities and to guarantee their effectiveness, provided that they comply with minimum standards of constitutionality. However, the coexistence of multiple justice systems within the

same legal order has generated challenges in its application, due to tensions between traditional models and the modern conception of justice administration as one of the State's exclusive monopolies, derived from its legitimate authority over the use of physical force (Weber, 2016).

During Rafael Correa's administration, public policies were implemented to improve access to education and employment under conditions of equality. In the educational sphere, the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture developed a Bilingual Education System for Indigenous peoples and nationalities, ranging from early childhood education to higher education (Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture, 2018). At the time, this approach sought to promote intercultural and plural education, recognizing the country's linguistic and cultural diversity, while also revaluing ancestral knowledge, customs, and traditions.

Nevertheless, the existence of a bilingual education system did not succeed in eliminating the educational gap affecting the Indigenous population. In 2015, the illiteracy rate among Indigenous people over the age of 15 reached 16.7%, while only 3.6% of the Indigenous population over the age of 24 had access to university education (National System of Social Indicators, 2018). These figures demonstrate that, despite normative advances, structural barriers persist that limit Indigenous peoples' access to educational and employment opportunities.

Methodology

This study adopts a documentary and qualitative research design, based on the review and analysis of secondary sources that make it possible to examine the development of Indigenous political participation and representation in Ecuador's legislative branch between 2005 and 2025, with particular attention to parliamentary performance in 2021. By providing a descriptive and analytical approach, this method helps to understand how different political, institutional, and social factors have influenced Indigenous representation in the National Assembly and its legislative performance.

Accordingly, the analysis is grounded in the review of official documents, legislative records and reports,

academic studies, press articles, and documents produced by Indigenous organizations, all of which provide relevant information on the political and social context of representation of this social sector. With this in mind, the historical qualitative analysis seeks to offer an in-depth account of Indigenous political representation in Ecuador's legislative sphere during the period under study, in order to understand its capacity for participation and influence in national decision-making.

As mentioned, two main dimensions stand out in the research. On the one hand, the evolution of Indigenous presence in the legislative branch is examined through the analysis of historical and legal sources, in order to understand changes in political participation. On the other hand, a qualitative study is conducted on the legislative performance of the Pachakutik caucus in 2021, exploring the bills presented, the political relationships established, and its overall performance in the National Assembly.

Results

Between 2005 and 2025, the analysis of Indigenous representation in Ecuador's National Assembly reveals a trajectory marked by ups and downs, influenced by political, social, and economic factors. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC, 2025), based on the 2010 Population and Housing Census, the Ecuadorian Indigenous population represented 7.03% of the total population. This figure is fundamental for contextualizing Indigenous presence in Ecuadorian politics, since the principle of self-identification allows citizens to identify themselves within a specific ethnic group, which in turn affects electoral outcomes.

In this sense, Indigenous participation in Ecuador's legislative branch has been fluctuating and has depended on different political circumstances. According to data from the National Electoral Council (2013), in 2006 the National Congress was composed of 100 deputies, of whom only six were Indigenous, equivalent to 6% of the total seats (García, 2013). At that time, the Indigenous population amounted to 830,418 people, according to the 2001 census. During this period, President Lucio Gutiérrez was removed from office due to his neoliberal policies and the

perception of betrayal toward his left-wing political allies, generating instability in Indigenous representation within the governmental structure.

In 2007, with the installation of the Constituent Assembly, greater representation of minority sectors in political decision-making was expected. However, of the 130 assembly members, only 2% were Indigenous. This period coincided with the rise to power of Rafael Correa, who promoted a purported refoundation of the Ecuadorian State through the convening of the sovereign people to exercise original constituent power via the establishment of a Constituent Assembly (Nogueira, 2009). This process was accompanied by a discourse that emphasized the inclusion of historically marginalized sectors.

Despite this, in the 2009 elections Indigenous representation remained low, with only three Indigenous assembly members out of a total of 124 legislators, maintaining participation at 2%. During this time, Correa's government sought to integrate some Indigenous leaders into its political movement, consolidating the concept of *Sumak Kawsay* or *Buen Vivir* within official discourse.

By 2013, Indigenous representation experienced a slight increase, reaching 8% of the total number of assembly members, with 11 Indigenous legislators among the 137 available seats. This increase coincided with a period of intense conflict between Rafael Correa's government and the Indigenous movement, largely due to extractivist policies that generated strong protests from affected communities, particularly against mining (Ramírez Gallegos, 2010). As León Trujillo (2010) explains, conflicts in the Highlands centered on access to and use of water, while in the Amazon region they were related to oil and mining activities. In the latter, confrontations between police, the military, and the Amazonian Indigenous sector resulted in several injuries and multiple arrests in Sucumbíos and Orellana. In addition, the government directly intervened by dismissing and imprisoning the prefect of Orellana, Guadalupe Llori, a member of the Pachakutik party and a defender of the protesters (León Trujillo, 2010). Nevertheless, she later won elections again, demonstrating that despite repression and political devaluation, the Indigenous

movement often generates greater local acceptance when it makes its demands visible.

The Correa administration repressed Indigenous mobilizations, characterizing their resistance as "childish environmentalism" (*ambientalismo infantil*) (Ramírez, 2010). According to a report by the organization Mongabay (2019), during Correa's government hundreds of Indigenous people were detained and accused of crimes without evidence while protesting against environmental and social measures imposed by the executive branch, with judicial harassment being used as a tool to silence demonstrations. A particularly illustrative example occurred between August 13 and 22, 2015, when more than one hundred peasants, Indigenous people, workers, and students were detained nationwide, especially in provinces where protests against the former president's economic measures were taking place. Issues such as the Capital Gains Law, tariffs, and imports, among others, motivated Indigenous sectors to denounce the lack of prior consultation regarding extractive projects in their territories (Mongabay, 2019). Paradoxically, despite political repression, Indigenous movements managed to increase their legislative representation during this period. Notable examples include protests surrounding the approval of the Water Law in 2014 (El Comercio, 2014), demonstrations in 2015 against mining and oil extraction in ecologically sensitive areas, and the national strike that occurred that same year (Daza & Santillana, 2015).

In 2017, Indigenous presence in the National Assembly declined again to 5%, reflecting a loss of three percentage points compared to the previous period (Briceño Pazmiño, 2021). This decrease may be attributed to several factors, including the cooptation of Indigenous leaders by the government, internal fragmentation within Indigenous organizations, and the lack of a unified strategy to strengthen political participation, as well as the alleged official strategy of creating the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONE) as a means of dividing the Indigenous movement (León, 2013). To reinforce this argument, it is important to note that since the 2006 electoral campaign, although competition for Indigenous voters existed between the

Alianza País (AP) party and Pachakutik–CONAIE, the future government allied itself with other organizations such as FENOCIN and FEINE. This strategy ensured that CONAIE was no longer the sole representative organization, but rather one voice among others, while FENOCIN gained greater recognition in decision-making spaces (León Trujillo, 2010). As León Trujillo (2010) notes, the recruitment of individuals who had previously contributed to Indigenous political representation resulted in fewer leaders within the movements and increased distrust in the organization, even leading to its weakening. In this context, the policies of *correísmo* contributed to the erosion of communal and ancestral territories, which may later have affected the credibility and cohesion of the Indigenous movement in national politics.

The year 2021 marked a turning point in the political history of the Indigenous movement, as its representation in the National Assembly reached a historic 36.99%, the highest level recorded to date, making it the country's second-largest political force (Briceño Pazmiño, 2021). The influence of key figures within the bloc in 2021 should be highlighted, such as Salvador Quishpe, former congressman and prefect of Zamora Chinchipe, and Guadalupe Llori, former prefect of Orellana, who was detained and accused of terrorism in 2007 for protests against Correa's government (Briceño Pazmiño, 2021). At the same time, Yaku Pérez emerged as a potential presidential candidate. He had served as president of ECUARUNARI, one of CONAIE's grassroots organizations, became an opponent of Correa's government, and was detained in 2015 during a series of protests alongside Salvador Quishpe. This episode increased his popularity and local support, eventually leading to his election as prefect of Azuay (Primicias, 2023).

Accordingly, one of the factors explaining the growth and consolidation of a strong Indigenous bloc in the 2021 legislature was the presidential candidacy of Yaku Pérez Guartambel for the Pachakutik movement. He obtained 19.42% of the vote in the first round of the presidential election and fell less than one percentage point short of advancing to the runoff (Primicias, 2023). Likewise, as reported by *El Mercurio* (2025), the visibility of his leadership, the

emphasis on environmental defense, the coattail effect of simultaneous legislative elections in presidential systems, and the struggle for collective Indigenous rights—combined with a context of growing dissatisfaction with the traditional political system—enabled Pachakutik to consolidate itself as the second-largest political force in the National Assembly with 27 seats. This granted the movement greater capacity to influence legislation and government oversight.

However, the increase in Indigenous representation in 2021 was not sustained in the 2025 elections, when representation in the National Assembly fell to 13.59%, with only nine Pachakutik assembly members remaining (Noboa, 2025a). As Noboa (2025a) notes, this decline can be explained by internal fragmentation within Pachakutik and the Indigenous movement more broadly. Yaku Pérez's departure from Pachakutik in 2021 and the founding of his own political movement, *Somos Agua*, in 2022 highlighted internal conflicts that weakened Indigenous unity (Primicias, 2023). In addition, Ecuador's political context underwent significant changes, including the emergence of new political forces, the reconfiguration of alliances, and the dissolution of the Assembly in 2021, all of which affected the Indigenous movement's ability to maintain its level of legislative representation.

Thus, throughout the 2005–2025 period, Indigenous representation in the National Assembly has been volatile, largely dependent on factors such as internal cohesion within Indigenous movements, the leadership of key figures, the capacity for social mobilization, and the evolution of the national political context. While 2021 represented a milestone in the history of Indigenous legislative participation, the decline in 2025 to nine seats—equivalent to 3.65%—was even lower than the 5.25% obtained by Leonidas Iza, Pachakutik's presidential candidate, in the first round (Noboa, 2025b). Furthermore, the shifting nature of alliances and agreement-building, as evidenced in the 2025 elections when five of the nine Pachakutik assembly members aligned themselves with the Acción Democrática Nacional (ADN) movement, reflects a perception of internal

disorganization that weakens political representation and fragments legislative action (El Mercurio, 2025).

Finally, *El Mercurio* (2025) notes that the Indigenous movement represented by Pachakutik has lost strength due to multiple factors, including the departure of emblematic figures or leaders from the party (such as Yaku Pérez), internal divisions, expulsions, and sudden fragmentation. In this sense, as shown in Figure 1, Indigenous political representation in the legislative branch has become a

puzzle in which multiple factors have complicated the sector's capacity for participation and influence as a unified bloc. Frequently, its members divide or align themselves with parties they previously opposed for individual benefit (Noboa, 2025b). From this perspective, it can be understood that the Indigenous movement has not fully succeeded in incorporating non-Indigenous sectors of the electorate, and given the volatility of its electoral results, its importance as a consolidated political force within Ecuador's political landscape remains uncertain.

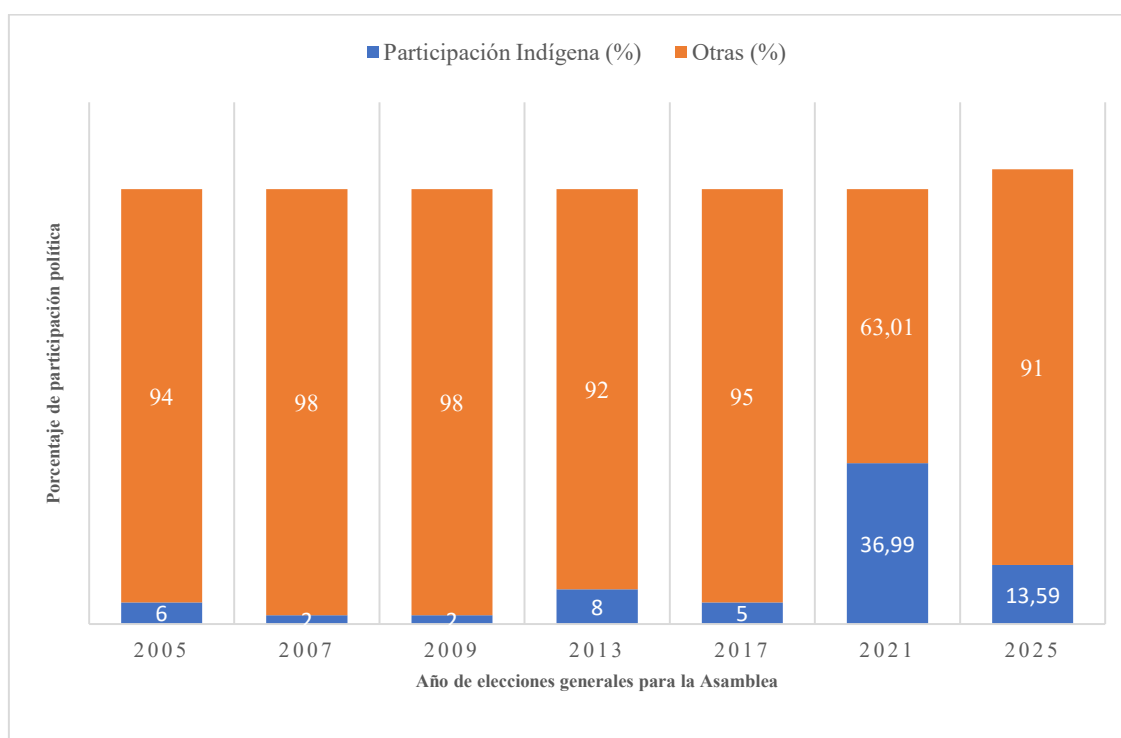


Figure 1. Distribution of political representation in the legislative branch (2006–2025 period). **Source:** Author's own elaboration based on data from the National Electoral Council (n.d.).

Analysis of Parliamentary Management in 2021

The analysis of the 2021–2025 Legislative Agenda of the Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement (MUPP) makes it possible to understand the parliamentary strategy of the Indigenous caucus in Ecuador's National Assembly and its focus on consolidating a plurinational and intercultural State. The document presents a programmatic structure based on four fundamental pillars: economy, education, ecology, and ethics. This agenda demonstrates an attempt to articulate policy measures with the demands raised by

Indigenous and popular sectors of the country, in alignment with the parliamentary agenda "*Minga for Ecuador*" of the 2021–2025 National Assembly, presented by Assembly President Guadalupe Llori, of which only 40% was ultimately implemented (Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo, 2021).

In 2021, one of the central aspects of the MUPP's parliamentary management was the pursuit of autonomy for the legislative branch, emphasizing the need for legislators to genuinely represent citizens (Castro, 2021). To this end, the caucus committed to

guiding its work within the framework of the “*Minka for Life*” initiative, which served as a legislative roadmap developed in alliance with the Democratic Left party and other independent assembly members. In total, 54 legislators formed a progressive bloc, from a perspective that sought to rebuild trust in institutions, particularly in Parliament (Castro, 2021). The objective was to promote structural reforms in the economic, educational, and environmental systems, as well as to guarantee respect for collective rights and governmental transparency.

According to Castro (2021), the parliamentary priorities included the review of mining and oil policies, the repeal of the Organic Humanitarian Law, the reduction of interest rates to democratize access to credit, and the oversight of electoral control bodies. In addition, the agenda proposed a set of immediate measures for the first 100 days, focused on legislative action and oversight in favor of Indigenous communities and vulnerable sectors. It also included

demands for autonomy and funding for the Indigenous University *Amawtay Wasi*, along with guarantees of open and inclusive access to higher education (Diario La Hora, 2021). Likewise, the caucus promoted amnesties and pardons for social activists (Diario La Hora, 2021).

As shown in figure 2, in legislative terms the caucus introduced 123 bills, of which 16% addressed economic issues, 8% were related to education and health, and only 3% focused on ecological matters. Notably, the majority of the proposals (63%) were grouped into miscellaneous categories, suggesting a need for better classification and stronger alignment with the proposed programmatic pillars. This, in turn, illustrates that despite the high expectations and public trust with which the 2021–2025 Assembly was inaugurated, neither the parliamentary agenda “*Minga for Ecuador*” nor Pachakutik’s priorities were fully achieved (Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo, 2021).

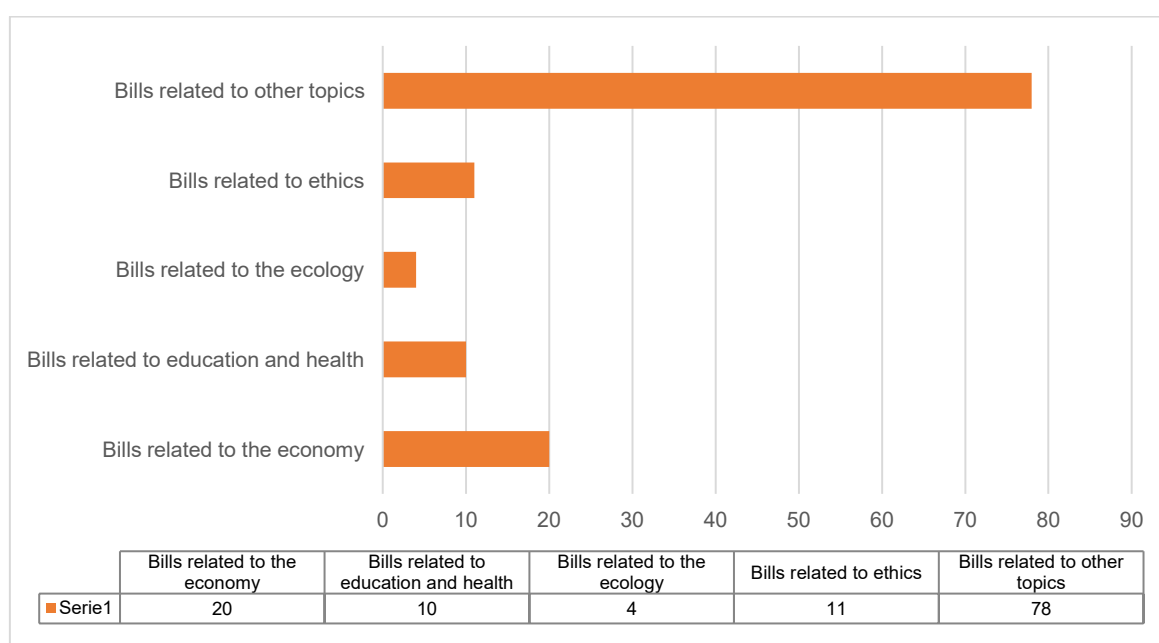


Figure 2. Legislative Agenda (2021–2025 period) of the MUPP. **Source:** Author’s own elaboration based on data from the National Assembly of Ecuador (n.d.).

The analysis of parliamentary management in 2021 also shows that, although the MUPP had a strong legislative presence, its capacity for influence was affected by internal fragmentation and fluctuating

political alliances (Borja, 2022). A paradigmatic case was the performance of Assembly member Guadalupe Llori, who, according to Borja (2022), rose to the Presidency of the National Assembly with the

support of several sectors, including the political movement of President Guillermo Lasso. However, she later faced internal conflicts within her own caucus and with other political forces, which weakened the cohesion of the movement. In other words, internal crises emerged within certain political organizations—among them Pachakutik—where fragmentation and declining political representation intensified in legislative scenarios, as evidenced by Llori's removal (Borja, 2022).

According to Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo (2021), when the National Assembly began its new term in 2021 it had 167 bills pending classification, 244 bills under consideration in committees, and 79 reports for first and second debate, among other matters pending review and approval by the Legislative Administration Council. With this in mind, the legislative agenda slowed down, resulting in most of the 123 bills introduced by the caucus not being addressed, particularly within the context of the Assembly's institutional crisis caused by the *muerte cruzada* and internal disputes between Pachakutik and CONAIE (Hidalgo Flor, 2023). In this sense, Pachakutik's legislative management in 2021 offers an opportunity to assess its impact in terms of oversight, given that the caucus prioritized the review of mining and oil contracts, the supervision of resource allocation from the Amazon Sustainable Development Fund, and oversight of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic (Diario *La Hora*, 2021). Nevertheless, the effective capacity for control was conditioned by the balance of power within the legislature and pressure from governmental and business sectors.

According to the 2021 parliamentary configuration of the Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement, an ambitious legislative strategy was articulated, aimed at the vindication of Indigenous rights, the transformation of the country's political and economic model, and environmental conservation (Movimiento de Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik [MUPP], 2021). However, its performance was constrained by a lack of internal unity and difficulties in consolidating legislative majorities that would have enabled the approval of its most emblematic proposals. Likewise, it is worth noting that, according to the MUPP (2023),

between May 2021 and May 2023, although 577 bills were introduced, only 57 were approved—30 reforming existing laws and 27 constituting new legislation—none of which fell within Pachakutik's agenda or priorities. Therefore, despite Pachakutik beginning the 2021 term with considerable relevance and legislative influence due to its alliances and level of political representation, internal crises, disagreements, and shifts in agenda priorities generated a lack of organization in its parliamentary management.

Moreover, although the agenda and planning were initially clear, most of Pachakutik's bills were either presented outside the agreed framework or were not debated. One example that merits special mention for its contribution and emblematic reflection of Indigenous political representation in the legislature was that of Assembly member Salvador Quishpe, who initially led the reform of the Organic Law on Higher Education (LOES) to guarantee free and equal access to higher education in Ecuador (Castro, 2021). However, by 2023 the National Assembly shelved the bill as part of more than 200 proposed reforms to the LOES, arguing that the project contained contradictions, legal gaps, and affected the autonomy of higher education institutions (Centro Digital, 2023).

Discussion

The Indigenous population of Ecuador has experienced a political process marked by structural discrimination and systematic exclusion (Altmann, 2013b). Ramírez (2024) notes that, although Indigenous rights have been formally recognized within the plurinational State, Ecuadorian society has erected barriers that have hindered integration across all spheres of political decision-making. Historically, Ramírez (2024) explains, Indigenous peoples have been marginalized and subjected to enduring structural conditions, limiting their access to legislative representation and relegating them to a subordinate role within the state apparatus.

At the same time, the Indigenous sector has developed its own organizational strategies that have enabled it to evolve into political movements and achieve political representation. In 1996, the Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement emerged,

marking a milestone in the struggle for Indigenous representation and later consolidating a space for participation within the legislative branch (Sánchez Parga, 2013). This movement arose with the aim of building a State based on the recognition of cultural diversity, promoting political agendas designed to counter historical exclusion and foster greater representation in decision-making processes.

Various studies have analyzed the emergence of the Indigenous movement within Ecuador's political arena (Acosta, 2001; Larrea, 2004; Sánchez-Parga, 2013; Cruz, 2012). Taken together, this body of research indicates that Indigenous political participation not only responds to demands for representation but also constitutes a strategy for the vindication of rights (Ilaquiche, 2008). In other words, this process has sought to guarantee authentic representation of Indigenous identity within governmental institutions and to promote respect for minority identities (Tello, 2012).

The formal recognition of collective Indigenous rights in the 1998 Constitution—specifically in Articles 83 and 84—represented an important step in creating a legal framework for Indigenous political participation (Santillana, 2012). However, these normative advances did not always translate into greater effective participation. In 1996, Pachakutik managed to articulate the representation of various Indigenous movements and organizations, securing a significant presence in Ecuadorian politics. Years later, in 2002, it supported the presidential candidacy of General Lucio Gutiérrez (Massal, 2010), and in 2006 it presented its own candidate, Luis Macas, thereby consolidating its national-level influence (Massal, 2010).

Rafael Correa's victory in 2006 marked a key turning point in relations between the Indigenous movement and the government. Although Correa's political project encompassed historical Indigenous demands—such as recognition of cultural diversity and the expansion of citizen participation—his administration generated friction with Indigenous organizations due to extractivist policies and territorial conflicts (Colpari, 2011). This situation led to growing opposition between the Indigenous movement and the

Twenty-First-Century Socialism regime, evidenced by the repression of mobilizations and the criminalization of Indigenous leaders in the media (Lalander & Ospina Peralta, 2012).

In recent years, Indigenous organizations have faced internal challenges that have limited their capacity for political influence. Fragmentation and the loss of institutional strength have weakened their cohesion and reduced their participation in the legislative branch (Ramírez, 2010).

Conclusions

Despite processes of claims-making, rights recognition, and policy proposals, the Ecuadorian State has not succeeded in effectively and non-assimilatively integrating Indigenous peoples into political life. Throughout the history of this sector of society, several governments have attempted to co-opt Indigenous leaders in order to consolidate control over state and territorial structures or to divide the sector, thereby diminishing its strength and mobilization capacity. As a result, the collective interests of Indigenous peoples have been displaced, preventing genuine empowerment of their representatives within the political system and hindering a coherent alignment between their social identity and political participation.

In this sense, Indigenous political representation within the legislative sector during the period in question shows that, although there is an active bloc with a degree of influence in decision-making, internal processes, tensions, and lack of organization in identifying legislative agenda priorities have weakened its actions in the aforementioned scenarios. Furthermore, the Ecuadorian State has managed resource distribution according to a utilitarian logic, favoring investment in the country's main economic centers and relegating rural regions, where a significant portion of the Indigenous population resides. Combined with their fragmentation as a political bloc and social challenges, this has reflected a dynamic that continues to deepen territorial inequalities, social exclusion, and limits the capacity of Indigenous peoples to influence the national and parliamentary political agenda on an ongoing basis.

Additionally, political changes in the 21st century facilitated the co-optation of Indigenous leaders and internal division within the sector. During Lucio Gutiérrez's government, a discourse of national unity was promoted to attract Indigenous sectors to his administration. Subsequently, the Citizens' Revolution incorporated several Indigenous leaders into its governmental structure, reducing their autonomy and weakening their political mobilization capacity, even creating parallel pro-government Indigenous organizations, in addition to developing media campaigns aimed at discrediting the sector and its historical leaders. In this way, to some extent, the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement has lost strength and visibility within the political arena, as evidenced by the lack of collective actions at the national level and in the performance and development of the legislative agenda.

The absence of authentic representation has generated a leadership crisis within the Indigenous movement, where individual interests have prevailed over collective demands. Consequently, Indigenous peoples continue to face an exclusionary social structure influenced by power dynamics that perpetuate historical inequalities. At the same time, the country's political and economic elite has maintained a domination model that favors the most privileged sectors, limiting Indigenous peoples' impact on state decision-making.

In sum, although the 2008 Constitution and the Democracy Code establish mechanisms for Indigenous participation in the political sphere, their implementation has been insufficient to guarantee effective representation. Despite the existence of affirmative action measures, structural barriers, co-optation strategies, and historical inequalities continue to limit the political integration of the Indigenous movement in Ecuador. Achieving true inclusion requires strengthening the autonomy of Indigenous peoples, ensuring their equitable access to education, and fostering political participation that genuinely reflects their collective interests and demands on an equal footing.

Authors' contribution

Preparation of the Introduction, Literature Review (state of the art), Theoretical Framework, Methodology, Results, Discussion, and Conclusions: all authors.

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